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# Camp shelters Nicaraguan refugees and rebels

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SANTA ROSA DE POCOSOL, Costa Rica — The young Nicaraguan men who were crowded into this Red Cross refugee camp in the Costa Rican savannah the other day tried to maintain at first that they knew nothing of the anti-Sandinista rebels fighting just about 35 kilometers away along the border.

The men said they came to this muddy encampment of tents to escape the repression of the Nicaraguan government and its military draft.

"I left because I was accused of being involved in the underground network of the rebels," said a 22-year-old from Managua, who like most of the men here shunned cameras and used a fictitious name. "I was unjustly accused."

The truth is that this camp — located in a sweltering gully in the northern Costa Rican savannah and funded by the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees — swells like a bruised knee whenever the Sandinista army hits rebel positions on the other side of the border.

As the conversation progressed, it became clear that Santa Rosa de Pocosal is as much a way station for *contras* as it is a camp for civilian refugees.

Under questioning, the 22-year-old, one of several friends gathered in a tent, acknowledged that he would fight with the rebel forces under Eden Pastora, the former Sandinista commander who turned against the Sandinista government and now has his headquarters in Costa Rica.

"Maybe we want to fight, but Eden Pastora doesn't have sufficient supplies and ammunition for everybody," he said.

His next comment, though, suggested that he had already served with Pastora. "Personally, I left because they ran out of ammunition."

The other men in the tent agreed.

One of them, a man from Bluefields, Nicaragua, who had a ridge of scar tissue up his belly, gestured to the others and said, "Right now, you can see all these people. If they had arms, they wouldn't be here. We would go right back in and fight the communists."

Jorge Bermudez, the Red Cross camp director, spoke of the difficulty of making political distinctions, conceding. "Probably some of them are *contras*, but I don't ask those types of questions. Besides, there's no way of telling because once they put down their arms they all look the same."

"Refugee camps aren't centers where you can come and go," Bermudez said. Nevertheless, 400 of the 3,000 refugees who have passed through the camp since it opened in March have left without a trace.

A 19-year-old who calls himself Gray Wolf said, "We're waiting here until we get the word to go," then added: "When we leave here, we'll have to do it in the night, like thieves."

Gray Wolf said he commanded a

platoon in Pastora's force, the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance. "It seems like I'm older," he said, "but I'm not. Living in the mountains grew this beard."

He estimated that about a third of the men in the camp had fought with Pastora's forces. Many of them fled Nicaragua last month after the Sandinistas swept through his camps near the border river, the San Juan.

"We had to leave Nicaragua because we ran out of ammunition, not because we ran out of bravery," he said. "Pastora knows we're ready to fight, but he doesn't know where we are."

Squatting in the mud and tugging

at his beard, Gray Wolf said he joined Pastora's alliance last year after he met some guerrillas who he decided were not mercenaries, as the Sandinistas claimed, "but people like myself."

He said Pastora's forces worked in platoons of 30 men, ambushing isolated military outposts. Sometimes, he said, they would lie in wait along roads to trip a Claymore mine when a Sandinista truck rolled by.

The men in Santa Rosa de Pocosal confirmed that the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance troops, who are estimated at 2,000 men, are undersupplied and decimated after the Sandinistas' three-month offensive in

southeastern Nicaragua, where Pastora's troops once were based at a camp called La Penca.

"We were defending the airstrip at La Penca in late June," said Gray Wolf. "When the first assault came, we thought we could win. But then wave after wave of [Sandinistas] came in, so we decided to go to Costa Rica."

The rebels attributed the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance's hard times to the lack of U.S. funds. It is uncertain whether Pastora's forces will receive any of the \$27 million in *contra* aid that was approved last week by President Reagan.

For political reasons, Pastora has resisted accepting CIA funds and U.S. pressure to unite with the main rebel group fighting in northern Nicaragua, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force. The northern group is heavily supported with U.S. funds.

To the rank-and-file such as Gray Wolf, the political distinctions between the northern and southern rebel forces are lost.

"I'd rather go with the FDN [the Nicaraguan Democratic Force] because they are better organized and armed," he said, "but if Pastora was armed, I'd go with him, too."

"I don't see much difference between the two," he said. "We're both fighting for democracy, I think."